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MASSIVE DEMONSTRATIONS last month in Hong Kong in support of democracy and against a Beijing-backed anti-sedition law seem to have shocked China's Communist rulers into the realization that they are out of touch with Hong Kong's population. But they do not seem shocked enough to accept the remedy for such a dilemma, which would be more democracy. Instead, they are following a more familiar Communist script: Make short-term concessions to popular anger while vilifying and seeking to isolate democracy movement leaders. And, reflecting nervousness about freedom in Hong Kong, China's leaders also have blocked the **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom** from visiting Hong Kong, prompting the commission to cancel a trip to China. "This action on the part of the Chinese government suggests a degree of Chinese control over foreign access to Hong Kong that is unprecedented and in contradiction to the concept of 'one country, two systems,' " commission chair Michael K. Young said.

"One country, two systems" is the formula meant to govern Hong Kong's odd relationship with China, of which it is officially a part. As residents of a British colony, Hong Kong residents came to enjoy freedoms of speech, assembly, worship and private ownership that mainlanders could only dream of. When Hong Kong reverted to Chinese control in 1997, Beijing promised not to interfere with those freedoms; and though there has been erosion, Hong Kong remains far freer than the rest of China. But China's effort to impose a sedition law that would have curtailed Hong Kong's freedoms heightened the nervousness of residents there about a gradual choking off of liberty. And thus far China, which controls who governs Hong Kong, has opposed any movement toward freer elections or a more open political process.

Last week the Straits Times newspaper reported that top leaders in China had agreed not to reintroduce the sedition law, in the interest of promoting "stability." The leaders also decided, the newspaper said, to broaden their contacts with political parties in Hong Kong to beef up the "patriotic front" and to "build up contacts with the pro-democracy

camp to win over its less hard-line members." This tended to confirm the prediction of Asian Wall Street Journal columnist Hugo Restall last week that Beijing would follow "classic united front tactics," pressuring some democracy proponents back into the fold while ostracizing and vilifying those who can't be pressured. Already, he noted, pro-China politicians and newspapers have been attacking Hong Kong's Catholic bishop, who had opposed the anti-sedition law, while Beijing's man in Hong Kong was likening the peaceful pro-democracy demonstrations to the violence of the Cultural Revolution. "The demonization of the democrats," Mr. Restall wrote, ". . . will alienate the majority of Hong Kong."

Such tactics will work against China's interests in other ways too. Taiwan's population will conclude that China cannot be trusted in any confederative agreement. And though the Bush administration for the most part has been disappointingly disengaged from this issue, in the long run an effort to rein in Hong Kong can only sour U.S.-China relations as well. If China really wants "to understand their views and complaints," as the Straits Times reported, it should let Hong Kong's people express those views through the ballot box.